

Naso Sermon 2018

We will soon be celebrating EBJC's 60th year. Two weeks from this Sunday is the Gala celebration at which we will honor and thank the founding members of our congregation.

Coming together in the late 1950s - initially at a card table, I've been told - the Jews of East Brunswick pushed themselves and each other to create a community, and a building in which that community could come together. Doing so required them to exceed themselves, to work together in order to create what no one or two or two of them could achieve alone. It meant doing things that few of them had much experience with: Raising huge amounts of money, buying land, designing a building. But their devotion to the cause of creating community made it possible for them to succeed.

The same kind of devotion, of extending one's obligations beyond what is expected, can also take place on the personal, individual level, which is exemplified in the Torah this week in the figure of the *nazir*. The *nazir* is someone who takes on obligations that go beyond what the law requires of them, behaving in a way that shows religious piety, of a kind that is atypical. By refraining from drinking wine, or consuming any type of grape products, and by avoiding contact with the dead, the *nazir* creates a temporary, heightened state of purity, choosing to shape their lives in a particular way through an exaggerated set of restraints. The *nazir* engages in an extreme form of devotion and self-discipline. The most famous *nazir* in the bible is Samson, whose mother vowed that his period of *nazirut* would last his entire lifetime, as we heard in today's haftarah.

It's possible that the case of the *nazir* is presented here because of its theme of self-restraint, of being conscious of what we are supposed to do and choosing to follow those

restraints. Freedom from bondage in Egypt did not mean the liberty to do just anything. Freedom is not anarchy; we are not free to do whatever we want, whenever we want. The Torah is a guide for knowing the limits of acceptable behavior for free people. The entire book of Bemidbar is, in a sense, a series of test cases, as the people go through a process of trial and error in exploring their newfound freedom. How far is too far when complaining to God, when pushing the limits of communal leadership? What will happen when those limits are transgressed?

The whole history of later rabbinic literature and Torah commentary can be seen as a deepening of that process, of pushing the limits of how exactly we should be applying the laws of the Torah. ‘Keep Shabbat,’ sure but how? When exactly? And what if the following 15 odd things happen, then what? A legal tradition teaches us what to do and not to do, what we should be striving for and what we should be avoiding. We are to discipline ourselves by performing certain actions but limiting others. And even when we want to go above and beyond, to take on restraints that are not strictly required, out of sense of piety, there are limits to such behaviors.

Even when the purpose of our rituals is not self-evident or simply explained, their utility as discipline builders remains. Out of gratitude to the God who liberated us, and as an exercise in expressing awe of God’s power, we live within the bounds God sets out and, in the case of the *nazir*, sometimes even go farther than we need to. Judaism makes the claim that only the well-disciplined are capable of feeling truly in tune with the divine, by living up to all the details of the ‘you shalls’ and the ‘you shall nots.’ It therefore behooves us to take the *mitzvot* seriously as signposts on the road to redemption, reminding us of where we’re going and how to get there.

Devotion to Judaism can take many forms: Joining a synagogue, taking part in communal events, supporting Israel, daily prayer, distinctive Jewish food. Those are all efforts that

individuals can take in feeling a part of the community. Like a *nazir*, such people take steps beyond what many Jews are willing to do at this time in Jewish history. But building a synagogue, helping to run communal events, serving in a leadership capacity and, yes, giving money that we may never have expected to, are ways to rise even higher, not for ourselves, but to serve others, both those here today and those we may never even know.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that instead of taking a leap of faith, Jews take a leap of action. We understand that faith is a starting point, but that living out that faith requires deeds. In fact, deeds on behalf of the community are themselves a kind of affirmation of faith: the belief that some things are more important than us as individuals, the belief that the values we hold and the institutions which give them life need us to work together, just as EBJC's founders did 60 years ago, to create and sustain Jewish life here. The figure of the *nazir* is praiseworthy, because he goes beyond what is expected of him, but until every *nazir* is matched by a **volunteer**, our effort will come up short of what our founders achieved. Coming to services on Shabbat is praiseworthy for each of us; coming one day during the week, or even one day a month to a weekday service benefits all of us. Paying our dues provides each of us with membership in the community and access to clergy; helping to fund a major renovation of the building creates a home for others who desperately yearn for one.

Our founders went beyond creating something for themselves. They created the future in which we are now living. We are the inheritors of their communal devotion, and we must live up to the same level of devotion in creating the next 60 years of Jewish experiences, to 120. Let's create the same future that the founders did, so that in 60 years, others will look back at us with pride and gratitude. Shabbat shalom.